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BOOK REVIEW

Walter Scott and Fame: Authors and Readers in the Romantic Age. *Robert Mayer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. viii+221.

You wouldn't have thought Walter Scott had much time for writing letters. When he wasn't cranking out a Waverley novel a year (sometimes more than one), he was writing long poems, editing multivolume editions of other writers' works, or collecting folksongs and ballads. But, as if all that writing wasn't enough, Scott also maintained a sizeable correspondence. The edition of his letters produced by H. J. C. Grierson in the 1930s runs to twelve volumes. Whichever tradesman supplied Abbotsford with pens and ink was on to a good thing.

Scott was a famous and bestselling author, well known as a poet even before the unprecedented commercial success of the Waverley novels. One of the side effects of his fame was that he often got letters from people he didn't know personally. He wrote back surprisingly often, sometimes entering into extended correspondence. He also kept many of the letters he received, and they have ended up in a number of archives, with the most important collection in the National Library of Scotland. Robert Mayer has mined this material diligently and he gives a thorough account of it, teasing out what it can tell us about the relationships between authors and readers in the early nineteenth century.

Grappling with hundreds of letters to Scott, Mayer at first attempted to develop an exhaustive typology of his correspondents. Some were fellow writers, some were informants, some were fans. But the archive refused to fit neatly into any set of categories, as individual correspondents shifted between roles, positioning themselves as mentors at one moment and devotees at another. Nonetheless, Mayer corrals his material into chapters on

different types of correspondent: “intimates,” “colleagues,” “clients,” and “fans.”

The “intimates” include a number of socially superior people who tried to cast themselves as Scott’s patrons. Successive Dukes of Buccleuch, Lord Montagu, and Sir John Sinclair helped Scott to secure sinecures, and did not hesitate to offer criticism and advice on his writings. Scott knew how to flatter them, and especially at the start of his career, he saw them as people who could help him make his way in the world. But his deference had its limits. He ignored Sinclair’s proposal that he should follow *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) with *The Lady of the Sea*, and so give Sinclair’s native Caithness the same kind of boost that Scott had already given Loch Katrine and the Trossachs. He put up with the insufferable Lady Abercorn, who wouldn’t let him forget that he hadn’t sent her a signed copy of *The Lady of the Lake*, but he never let her in on the Waverley secret. Mayer argues that Scott had mentors but no patrons. He resisted patronage, and when his correspondents behaved as mentors, it was because Scott had ascribed that role to them himself.

Scott corresponded with several other authors, including William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, Joanna Baillie, Maria Edgeworth, and James Hogg. His letters to the two Lake Poets reveal, Mayer suggests, that they had fundamentally different understandings of authorship. While Wordsworth and Southey, in different ways, were dedicated to pursuing their own artistic paths in the face of the reading public’s indifference or hostility, Scott thought the writer had a responsibility to his audience. Scott accepted that Wordsworth, in particular, might be the better poet, but he urged him and Southey to pay more attention to the bookselling business in order to maximize the circulation of their works and the income from them. Unfortunately, Mayer uses the 1851 edition of Southey’s letters instead of the modern scholarly one (*The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Lynda Pratt, Timothy Fulford, and Ian Packer, https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters). Scott’s concept of authorship was unabashedly professional. He was happy to be a man of business as well as a man of letters. When he wrote to Baillie and Edgeworth, Mayer suggests, he treated them as fellow professional writers. At times, this overrode the conventional gendered courtesies of their correspondence, allowing them to write with the kind of frankness only possible between professional equals.

Scott’s “clients” were those correspondents who sought his advice or assistance for their own benefit. They wanted to draw on his influence to get their work published or to secure contributions from him for magazines. But they also tended to ascribe almost magical powers to him, sometimes looking to him for advice on the course of their lives. Some sent him poems that had been rejected by one publisher after another, in the belief that Scott’s genius would discern beauties that others had missed. Scott han-

dled these correspondents with considerable tact. He wrote pointedly to Richard Polwhele that his latest unpublishable poem was “fully equal to any you have yet written” (120–21). The fact that they addressed him in the first place suggests both how many readers aspired to become writers and how accessible to his readers a famous writer like Scott could be.

For some letter writers, however, corresponding with Scott was an end in itself, not a means to advancement or emolument. These “fans” sought to put themselves in contact with their idol, who they usually approached with exaggerated deference. They wrote to Scott in a highly emotional register, sometimes sending him gifts (a sword, a candlestick) and offering him tributes. One half-crazed individual wanted Scott to employ him as a hermit at Abbotsford. Others wanted only to put themselves in contact with a man whom they already seemed to know through his works. Here, it was the connection with Scott itself that his readers valued. One correspondent pestered Scott for an engraved portrait: what he really wanted was not the portrait (which he could have purchased for himself) but the honor of having been sent it by Scott. These fans, then, testify to a deeply affective connection emerging between Scott and his readers.

Mayer concludes by suggesting that Scott inhabited a newly emerging culture of celebrity, in which patronage relationships gave way to a new kind of relationship between authors and readers. The Romantic author is often understood as a figure apart from his audience, even disdainful of it, and Scott was often described as a magical figure of almost superhuman abilities. But his self-conception as an author was much more workmanlike. In his answers to correspondents, he appears as a down-to-earth businessman, dependent on public favor for his success, and therefore obligated to be accessible to the public for which he writes. There is very little in the book about how this conception played out in Scott’s works, and its approach to the history of celebrity is rather undertheorized. But in its conscientious archival research it offers an interesting new approach to Scott’s reception in his lifetime.

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